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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a historical study of three issues in education: (1) the teaching of morals; (2) teacher retraining; and (3) practices in language arts. It demonstrates that recent actions by the South Dakota legislature to ensure that children are given moral and character instruction are similar to efforts undertaken in the 1890s in North and South Dakota. The paper then notes that the ongoing training of teachers is another issue of recent concern that was also widespread in the Dakotas in the late 19th century. It also explains that the current emphasis on whole-language instruction and a deemphasis on rote spelling lessons and books also hearken back to the 1890s, when "A Teachers Manual and Guide and Course of Study for the Common Schools of South Dakota" (H. L. Bras and others) emphasized similar ideas. The paper concludes that being aware of past practices and methods can help educators understand that much of the current emphasis on morality education, teacher retraining, and whole language education has its roots in the 19th century. (MDM)

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From Dakota Territory to Today:
How much has Education Changed?

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Paper Presented At
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Abstract

This paper presents a historical study of three issues in education including morality, teacher inservice training, and practices in the instruction of reading and language arts. Presented in this paper is a comparison between the views prevalent in the late 1800's to early 1900's in Dakota Territory (and early North and South Dakota) and current practices and philosophies of education today in this same region of the country.

From Dakota Territory to Today:

How Much Has Education Changed?

John Dewey (1920) set out the hope that we would not have to "repeat the past" but could learn from it to make a better future. In this historical research relative to educational practices in the early Dakotas there is evidence to show that in many ways we do repeat and maintain the practices begun a century ago.

There are three issues that will be addressed in this paper from a historical perspective, these being the education of morality, teacher retraining, and practices in language arts. The use of state and territorial educational documents and newspaper documents will help to document these positions.

Morality

Schools have often been used as a means to further the ideals and messages of the moral conscious of our times and this is as true today as in the early Dakota years. Signed in March of 1992, the South Dakota legislature amended a law to ensure that:

"...special moral and character instruction shall be given in all public and nonpublic elementary and secondary schools in the state that is intended to impress upon the minds of students the importance of truthfulness, temperance, purity, sexual abstinence, AIDS instruction, public spirit, patriotism, citizenship, respect for honest labor, obedience to parents, respect for the contributions of minority and ethnic groups to the heritage of South Dakota, and due deference to old age." (p. 177)

This is not so much different than messages found in A Teachers Manual and Guide and Course of Study for the Common Schools of South Dakota that had been prepared by a committee of county superintendents in 1892 (Bras, Lange, & Gleason, 1892). As part of the outlined curriculum teachers were to lecture on the effects of alcoholic drinks and narcotics. As was stated they were to "make use of simple illustrations and stories showing the evil effects of drinking" (p. 35). They were to "bring these talks into the regular lesson when opportunity offers" (p. 35). As part of the course of study in elementary physiology and hygiene outlined for the students in their fifth and sixth years, students were also to be taught of the proper and improper uses of alcohol. As was stated, it is "used improperly as a beverage" (p. 43). They were also to teach of the "evil effects of" nicotine as well as those of opium.

Similar opinions were being expressed by the state Superintendent of Education in North Dakota, Laura Eisenhuth (1894). Two of the topics in her state recommended course of study included scientific temperance training and morals and manners. Scientific temperance training had not been standardized across the state. The teachers were believed to be in need of formal teaching methods to provide this content according to Eisenhuth.

"That there is a woeful lack of good manners and an absence of moral sentiment in the rising generation is not infrequently painfully impressed upon us. The teachers must not be held wholly responsible, but a greater effort must be made to make home

influence and school influence meet and work together towards a better moral development" (Eisenhuth, 1894, p. 26-27). These words could easily be echoed in today's society and schools.

Professional Inservice Education

Another issue that is true today is the importance of ongoing education for the teachers. In South Dakota, teachers are required to earn 6 credits or the equivalent in inservice hours every five years (Article 24:02). In the 1992 state legislature further credibility was given to the notion of training of teachers. Recent South Dakota legislation has allowed the use of school times for teachers to pursue inservice educational training as they work to improve the schools and their curricula. Schools were given flexibility to use the three days of curriculum and staff improvement during the school term retaining requirements for length of the school term (SS 127, 1992).

This ongoing training of teachers is not a new concept. In the early years of both North and South Dakota, the county and state superintendents of instruction were influential in setting guidelines for the rural schools. Many supported in-service training for the teachers of the county through the Reading Circle, teacher institutes, and local teacher associations (Bates, 1896; Halland, 1898; Bras, Lange, & Gleason, 1892).

The Reading Circle was the professional organization most mentioned in the late 1800's in both North and South Dakota writings of the superintendents of instruction. The South Dakota Teacher's Reading Circle was begun in July of 1886 by the South Dakota Education Association with some 54 members (Bras, Lange, &

Gleason, 1892). This had increased to 735 by 1890. Participants used the reading of both professional and general literature as a means of inservice training. Exams at the end of the year over the readings resulted in certificates and four such annual certificates qualified teachers for a reading circle diploma.

Books were chosen for the teachers along with efforts to secure low prices for the books. In 1891-1892 the books selected were as follows: (1) Welch's How to Organize, etc. A Country School which cost the teachers sixty cents, (2) Gordy's Lessons in Psychology at ninety cents, and (3) Hawthorne and Lemmon's American Literature costing \$1.25 (Bras, Lange, & Gleason, 1892).

The vision and importance of ongoing education of the teachers of Dakota territory then and now has been maintained. There is little to indicate that this will not remain in the forefront in the next century.

Teaching of Language Arts and Reading

No area causes as much discussion as the "proper method" for instruction of language arts. The same was true in Dakota Territory.

Currently there is a trend to teach the language arts as an integrated whole (Hennings, 1990). The use of spelling books and the focus on the instruction of individual letter sounds in the primary grades is discouraged. The selection of spelling words from the students' actual reading texts are encouraged rather than the use of arbitrary lists of words.

One might recognize some of the same thoughts in the recommended course of study back in 1892 (Bras, Lange & Gleason,

1892). In the recommendations for the third year of school it is stated as follows:

"Spelling-No text book should be used in this grade but spelling should be taught with each branch, and especially in connection with reading.

1. Dictation exercises can be given by the teacher. Do not have the pupil spell a word until he knows the meaning and can use the word in a sentence.

2. The spelling lesson can be gathered by the teacher from the lessons during the day and placed upon the blackboard for study.

3. Make use of the dictionary and thus stimulate self study. Note--Do not allow the pupils to take up a text book. There is plenty of time in the fourth and fifth reader grades" (p. 21).

In the fourth and fifth grades one finds the initial instruction in the use of letter sounds and diacritical markings as a cueing system for spelling. Does this sound so different than what is done today?

Education is often defined as new and "modern" but there remain many of the same practices prevalent a century ago. If one evaluates the changes in the areas of morality, language arts, or inservice education, it is easy to see that "everything old is new again". Being aware of the past can certainly help educators understand where they are now in the future and wonder if we have really have gone very far at all.

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